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Enforcing Precarity: Bureaucratic Machinations, Complicity and Hierarchies of Academic Lives

Imponiendo la precariedad: maquinaciones burocráticas, complicidad y jerarquías de la Academia

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SUMMARY

Adjunct is the term used in the United States to refer to the contingent instructors that work in higher education with poor pay, no benefits and short-term contracts. Adjuncts now make up the majority of the teaching professoriate at United States colleges and universities. Drawing on three years' experience working as an adjunct, the author offers an account of precarity in academia in the United States. While academic precarity is often assumed to affect all adjuncts equally, race, gender and class in fact lead to an uneven distribution, rendering certain bodies precarious even when they do not comprise adjuncts or contingent laborers. This makes it imperative to recognise that academic precarity encompasses a range of often incommensurable experiences. At the same time, discussions of precarity often overlook the complicity of full-time faculty staff and administrators who enforce precarity and reproduce hierarchies of academic lives by keeping adjuncts closed off from university resources and by asking them to work without compensation. How might a collective refusal of the reproduction of academic hierarchies be practiced without being depicted as evidence of not caring enough about our work? And how might such a refusal be a strategy for demanding better working conditions for all?

Keywords: Precarity; Adjunct; United States; Academic Hierarchies; Complicity; Refusal.

RESUMEN

Adjuncts es el término usado en los Estados Unidos para referirse a los profesores con contratos temporales, de baja remuneración y sin protección social. Hoy constituyen la mayoría de la plantilla del profesorado en universidades y *colleges* estadounidenses. Partiendo de mis tres años de experiencia como adjunta, este artículo es un relato de la precariedad en la academia

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norteamericana. Aunque se suele asumir que la precariedad afecta igual a todos los *adjuncts*, la raza, el género, y la clase dan forma a distribuciones diferenciadas de la precariedad y construyen ciertos cuerpos como precarios incluso aunque no sean *adjuncts*. Y es que la precariedad en la academia incluye una gama de experiencias a menudo incommensurables. Las discusiones sobre la precariedad también suelen pasar por alto la complicidad de los profesores permanentes y de los administradores, que imponen la precariedad y reproducen jerarquías de la academia al mantener a los *adjuncts* lejos de los recursos de la Universidad y al pedirles que trabajen sin compensación. ¿Cómo practicar un rechazo colectivo de la reproducción de las jerarquías académicas sin que se entienda como muestra de que no nos preocupamos por nuestro trabajo? ¿Cómo ese rechazo puede servir para demandar mejores condiciones de trabajo para todos?

Palabras clave: Precariedad; *Adjuncts*; Estados Unidos; Jerarquías académicas; Complicidad; Rechazo.

ADJUNCT BEING

The poor pay and total job insecurity of adjunct professors in the United States is increasingly known about thanks to labor organizing and critical writing (often by adjuncts themselves) that exposes the corporatization of higher education and the plight of its contingent academic labor (Alvarez 2017; Daniel 2016; Hoeller 2014; Kahle and Billeaux 2015; Kendzior 2013). Yet, during the three years that I worked as an adjunct, I found that most of my students rarely knew that most of their instructors were adjuncts. Treating this as a “teachable moment,”² I would explain that adjuncts get paid on a per-class basis, make an average of \$20,000 annually, often work at multiple institutions to make ends meet, usually do not have insurance, are excluded from university governance, and are ineligible for university funds for professional development (American Association of University Professors 2017).³ Much to my students’ shock, adjuncts also make up the vast majority of the teaching professoriate at United States colleges and universities.⁴

The transformation of universities into corporations aimed at producing capital largely accounts for these shifts in academic labor (Brown 2015; Schwartz 2014). Within the context of these material and historical conditions, administrators and full-time faculty also exacerbate and perform complicity with the devaluation of adjunct labor, making it more difficult for us to be good teachers and to form coalitions demanding better labor conditions for all.⁵ While the abysmal pay, the fear of getting sick without insurance, and the last minute course assignments are critical aspects of the harried life of academic precarity, I offer an account of some of the less recognized ways

² The CUNY Adjunct Project suggests raising awareness among students about adjuncts, <<http://cunyadjunctproject.org/teaching-resources/>> (Access date: 24 Apr. 2018), though there are sometimes adverse repercussions to this (Riederer 2014).

³ Adjuncts’ insecurity also has implications for free speech and knowledge production (Birmingham 2017; Chomsky 2014; Swidler 2016).

⁴ This was not always the case. “Since 1975, tenure and tenure-track professors have gone from roughly 45 percent of all teaching staff to less than a quarter” (Weissmann 2013).

⁵ This complicity is undergirded by the myth of meritocracy (Alvarez 2017) and a discriminatory system of “tenurism” (Hoeller 2014) that has disastrous consequences for political solidarity in the academy (Bousquet 2014; Schwartz 2014).

in which precarity is experienced and normalized (see also Neff 2017). Reflecting on my experience as an adjunct at three academic institutions in New York City over the course of three years, I describe the material environment, affective conditions, and workplace dynamics in which (some) adjuncts labor. My goal is to expose a few of the mechanisms that help reproduce academic hierarchies and unevenly distribute precarity.

DISTRIBUTIONS OF PRECARIY

There is a materiality to occupying the bottom rung of the academic ladder. Sometimes you cannot print your students' papers because the printer in the adjunct office is broken. When adjuncts complain, they are reprimanded for being too rough with the printer. Months later, the printer remains unfixed, though someone has now taken the university's "out of order" sign and defaced it with a black sharpie, adding the words "STILL." The computers in the adjunct office groan when they start and sluggishly load software from the mid-2000s.⁶ As an adjunct, you might receive a passive aggressive response from the department chair when you ask for help photocopying your course materials. After all, "part-time faculty does their own photocopying."⁷ Your classroom will most likely not have any windows and, if you are lucky to get an office, it will most certainly be in the basement. And even though you and your fellow-adjuncts far outnumber the full-time faculty, hardly anyone bothers to learn your name because you will likely not return after the semester. When the well-intentioned, tenured faculty talk to you, they paper over your exploitation as the condition of possibility for their privileged position (Alvarez 2017; Birmingham 2017). "This is a *great* place to work," they say, as if occupying different positions in the academic hierarchy does not mean you inhabit entirely different worlds at the same academic institution.⁸

Broken printers, classrooms without natural light, and the goodhearted refusal of the tenured faculty to acknowledge the system of exploitation on which their positions rest are the utterly unsurprising material and affective manifestations of the structural conditions that produce adjuncts. But to speak of adjunct being as a generic, shared condition belies the historically uneven distribution of precarity, its gendered and racialized quality. Indeed, the "ghettofication of black scholars in adjunct roles," writes Tracie Cottom (2014), long precedes the current adjunct crisis, which "cannot be separated from its racist roots." Tenure and the casualization of academic labor maintain academia as a white space either by keeping scholars of color in precarious positions (Cottom 2014; Flaherty 2016) or by excluding them entirely (Silva 2015). Race

⁶ Inadequate technology and spaces to meet with students have grave consequences for teaching and advising (McKenna 2015).

⁷ The term "part-time" faculty, which is often used interchangeably with "adjunct," obscures that many part-time faculty work at multiple institutions and therefore are not part-time teachers.

⁸ Some tenured faculty have rightly condemned their peers for failing to support equity for contingent faculty (Brown 2010) and for normalizing this inequality (Betensky 2017). See also academic labor activist Marc Bosquet's incisive critique of Claire Potter's suggestion that adjuncts refuse their exploitation by quitting (Potter 2017).

thus produces an incommensurability in affective experiences of academic precarity—what Jade Ferguson (2013) astutely calls the color line of sadness. This makes it imperative that we qualify the “we” of precarity and *not* claim, as Nadine Attewell (2016: 186) cautions, “that ‘we’ are all having the same kind of not nice time, that we are all precarious in the same way.”⁹

I took my first job as an adjunct while I was a broke graduate student at a New York City community college.¹⁰ In the adjunct office, I developed a rapport with two other adjuncts who had been teaching a full-time course load there for years. They were both women of color and I am not. One had a master’s degree from a public university and the other a doctoral degree from a non-elite university.¹¹ Both had second jobs. Over the semester, we regularly exchanged teaching experiences and class materials. When it came time for the course assignments for the following semester, my fellow adjuncts eagerly asked me when I would be teaching. Sheepishly, I confessed I would not be returning. I had received a dissertation writing fellowship and would not need to work. “Ah,” their facial expressions suggested, “you are one of those”: an adjunct who could transform precarious work into symbolic capital and a useful job experience to put on a resume; an adjunct who inhabited a structural position that made it possible to move on to more lucrative, prestigious forms of precarity and, from there, possibly even into one of the few well-compensated and permanent positions in academia.¹²

Race, gender, and class shape how precarity is distributed, its forms and intensities. That I have been able to convert my experiences of precarity into symbolic and other forms of capital is not disconnected from my white privilege, my middle-class background, and the fact that my PhD is from a desirable brand university offering me access to elite networks of powerful academics. This is not, of course, to suggest that my experience of adjuncting with poor pay and no benefits or even of prestigious, if temporary, writing and postdoctoral fellowships has not been an experience of precarity, or that it is justified. I merely wish to make the simple point—so clear to my fellow adjuncts though often lost in the conversation on precarity—that precarious academic laborers do not have similar or commensurable experiences.¹³ Thus, while the material conditions of adjuncting can and do produce a kind of solidarity, they are also built on existing inequalities and hierarchies to produce uneven experiences of precarity and enforce hierarchies of academic lives.

BUREAUCRACY, COMPLICITY, AND REFUSAL

The blissful year of my dissertation writing fellowship was followed by a difficult

⁹ Gibney and an anonymous author (2012) express the precarity of being a black woman in a “devastating racialized project,” regardless of one’s contract.

¹⁰ In the United States, a community college is a public institution that provides two years of higher education.

¹¹ This matters in the United States where the prestige of one’s university functions “like inherited wealth” (Kendzior 2015) and determines hiring patterns.

¹² Upward mobility from contingency, however, remains extremely limited.

¹³ This point is poignantly made in the exchange between Ferguson (2013) and Wunker (2013).

year of unemployment, and a stream of rejections. Then, thanks to friends and a former teaching supervisor, I re-entered the precarious workforce with two part-time teaching jobs at two institutions. It was the networks and symbolic capital that I mentioned above, which distinguished my precarity from that of my colleagues at community college, that helped me land these jobs. And yet, these networks did not prevent me from being entirely closed off from the university's resources or mitigate my experience of precarity.

Shortly after beginning my job as an adjunct at Hunter College, a public four-year institution that is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), I learned of a seminar offered through the Faculty Resource Network (FRN) of which Hunter is a part that was relevant to my research and an excellent opportunity for professionalization. If accepted, attendance to the seminar would be free and I would cover all other expenses.¹⁴ To complete my application, I needed a letter of institutional support. The process to obtain this letter began with several emails to the Dean for Diversity and Compliance, who never responded to me. Unable to wait any longer, I went to the dean's office where I answered a slew of curious questions about how I was going to afford the international airfare to the seminar. The dean agreed to issue the letter of support if the chair of the Anthropology Department would also support me. This, in turn, had to be approved by the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. Several days later, I learned that my request for institutional support had moved up the ladder of Hunter's bureaucracy. It eventually reached the provost who denied my request. In a condescending email, the chair of the Anthropology Department justified Hunter's decision, calling my request "unusual for a first-time adjunct." He was certain I would be disappointed but reassured me that there would be other opportunities for me. It was not, after all, a reflection of my scholarly achievements but of the university's "priorities."

But if the university's "priorities" were not to support the bulk of their faculty—something that no one, from the chair of the Anthropology Department to the provost seemed willing to challenge through a simple letter of institutional support—this certainly did not hinder attempts to value adjunct labor symbolically when it could be useful to the department's reputation and enrollment. Shortly after dealing with Hunter's bureaucracy, which sealed my decision never to teach there again (an intransigent position I had the privilege to take), the chair of the department sent an email to both adjuncts and full-time faculty. In the email, the department chair strongly encouraged all of us to go to the Anthropology Department party, to publicize it, and to give extra credit to students that attended. The email stressed the importance of the adjuncts' research to the department's profile and to attracting students to the major. An email from the student-run Anthropology Club followed. The students had launched a well-intended initiative to strengthen adjunct-student relations and to promote an understanding of adjuncts as scholars and not just as exploited workers. The students also asked adjunct faculty to attend the party and briefly present on our research.

Whereas a few weeks before I had been a "first time adjunct" making an unusual request for university resources, I was now being asked by the chair to perform the

¹⁴ This is what Kendzior (2014) has called the "pay to play" business model in academia where one's access to a professionally useful experience is contingent on having the money to pay for it.

same service to the department as full-time faculty. Even though adjuncts at CUNY, unlike full-time faculty, are paid an hourly wage for their classroom instruction, no compensation was offered for coming to the party, sharing our research, and taking attendance, as the chair of the department had requested. While the students presumably saw the party as a platform for adjuncts to speak as scholars, this required us to perform more uncompensated labor and framed our contingency as a resource. Ironically, occupying the position of adjunct in the academic hierarchy led multiple Hunter College administrator-bureaucrats to deny me an opportunity for professional development that would have come at no cost to them. Now it was my very position as an adjunct that was being seized on as a potential asset (though I suspect that *not all* adjuncts were seen as equally valuable resources).

Angered by the request that I perform uncompensated labor, I did not attend the party or even mention it to my students. I was, nonetheless, wracked with guilt. How could I, a dedicated instructor, not generously share my knowledge with the department's students? Was I punishing the students for the university's "priorities"? And what did it mean that refusing to labor for free felt like not caring? Asking adjuncts to work for free as a labor of love not only "weaponizes" our love for what we do against us (Alvarez 2017) but it also risks being part of the "overtime labor of carework" that helps make the generalization of precarity more bearable (Attewell 2016: 187).

While this experience raises questions of how we—recognizing of course the heterogeneity and incommensurability in this collective pronoun—are to practice refusal as a strategy for demanding better labor conditions, it also raises the very uncomfortable issue of complicity. Indeed, if the neoliberalization of higher education has made academic labor increasingly precarious, it also takes the complicity of bureaucrats and full-time faculty to enforce ideas about academic hierarchies through seemingly innocuous practices such as not supporting the professional development of adjuncts or asking that they present their research without compensation at department parties.

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